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**Project for
Excellence in
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Religion in the News

Islam and Politics Dominate Religion Coverage in 2011

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Overview

The biggest religion stories of 2011 involved tensions over Islam and questions about faith in presidential politics, especially Mormonism, according to an annual review of religion in the news by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) and the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Events and controversies related to Islam also dominated [U.S. press coverage of religion in 2010](#). However, coverage of some stories faded in the past year, notably coverage of the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, which received much more [media attention in 2010](#).

Compared with topics such as politics and the economy, religion does not typically receive a lot of attention from the mainstream news media, and 2011 was no exception. When religion did make news, it was often because of accusations about extremism or intolerance. For instance, among the biggest individual stories of 2011 were a controversial congressional hearing about the threat of homegrown Islamic terrorism and the fallout after a Florida pastor staged a Koran burning. And one of the top religion and politics stories of the year centered on an incident in which a Texas minister called the Mormon faith a "cult."

The discussion of religion in social media in 2011 was quite different than the coverage in the traditional press. None of the top religion-related subjects among bloggers in 2011 was a top story in traditional media outlets. While the presidential campaign and political incidents involving Islam captured the attention of the traditional press, bloggers focused on such topics as the Rapture predictions of a Christian radio host and science and religion. Bloggers also tended to cover religion in a less sustained way than the mainstream media.

These are among the findings of a new study that examines news coverage in a broad range of mainstream media sources, as well as in blogs and on Twitter, from Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2011.

Among the key findings of the study:

- Religion accounted for 0.7% of all mainstream media coverage studied in 2011, down from 2.0% in 2010. In the 52 news outlets monitored throughout the year, including the evening TV news programs, newspaper front pages, top cable news programs, top news websites and top radio programs, religion received about as much coverage as race/gender/gay issues (0.8%) and immigration (0.7%).
- Islam has become a bigger part of the media's focus on religion in recent years. Six of the top 10 religion stories in 2011 were about Islam. This continues a trend first seen in 2010, when four of the top five religion stories involved controversies related to Islam. In 2007-2009, by contrast, Islam-focused stories generally accounted for a much smaller share of the coverage.
- Viewed from another angle – the specific religious faiths on which media coverage focused – Islam again ranked at the top. It was the subject of nearly a third (31.3%) of the religion "newshole" – the amount of space and time devoted to religion news online, in print, on television and on the radio – in 2011. This was nearly three times the amount that focused on

Catholicism (11.3%) and more than three times the amount that focused on Mormonism (9.6%).

- While a variety of stories about Islam collectively accounted for the biggest share of media coverage about religion in 2011, the largest single storyline involving religion was the presidential election campaign. The campaign accounted for 13.1% of all religion coverage studied. But while it ranked first for the year, coverage of religion in the presidential election was down considerably from four years earlier, in the run-up to the 2008 election, when campaign news made up 23.8% of 2007 religion coverage.
- An analysis of the past five years of religion coverage suggests that interest in religion tends to be heavily event-driven, at least at the top of the media agenda. In 2008, for instance, Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the United States accounted for about 37% of all religion coverage during that year, though the visit itself lasted for only six days in April. And 82.3% of the stories about the visit were published or broadcast within that six-day window.
- Users of another social media platform, Twitter, gave less prominence to religion in 2011 than they had the previous year. Only during one week in 2011 did a religion-focused story appear among the top five stories discussed on the micro-blogging tool. (Interest was triggered by a BBC report on a group of scientists who predicted that religion was headed for extinction in certain parts of the world.)

This examination of religion coverage in the media is built from two separate areas of research. The study of traditional news sources analyzed nearly 46,000 stories from newspaper front pages, home pages of major news websites, the first half-hour of network and cable television news programs and the first half-hour of radio news and talk shows. (For details, see the [methodology](#).) The content of new media was analyzed separately by aggregating and coding a sample of blogs, tweets and other sources monitored by Tweetmeme, Technorati, Icerocket and Twitteruly, which track millions of blogs and social media entries. (For details, see the New Media Index [methodology](#).)

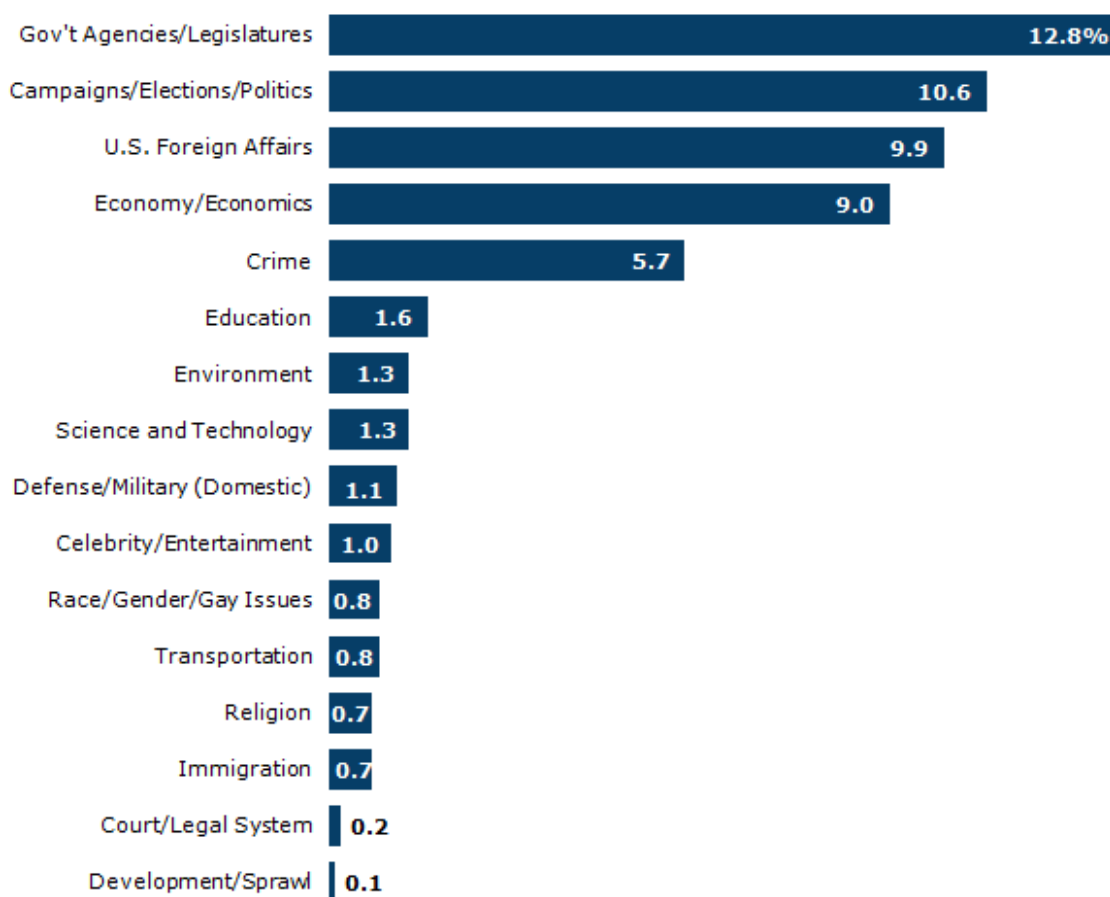
Religion Coverage Overall in 2011

Overall, religion received somewhat less media attention in 2011 than it did a year earlier.

Of the entire universe of news content analyzed by PEJ on an ongoing basis, religion-related issues and events accounted for 0.7% of the total “newshole” or amount of space and time devoted to news online, in print, on television and on the radio in 2011. That was down from 2.0% in 2010.

Selected Topics in the U.S. Media, 2011

Percent of mainstream media coverage (newshole) devoted to each subject



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PEJ monitors 25 different general topics in the news. At the top of the list in 2011 were government agencies/legislatures and politics/elections, followed by U.S. foreign affairs and the economy.¹ Religion ranked 22nd, receiving about the same level of attention as immigration, transportation and race/gender/gay issues. By comparison, coverage of science and technology, the environment and education slightly outpaced coverage of religion this past year.

Most of the religion coverage in 2011 (74.6%) dealt with stories that took place in the U.S. Less than a sixth of the coverage (15.2%) had an international focus, while 9.1% of the coverage had both domestic and international dimensions.² The coverage of domestic stories was slightly higher in 2011 than it was in 2010, when 70.3% of religion coverage was focused on domestic topics.

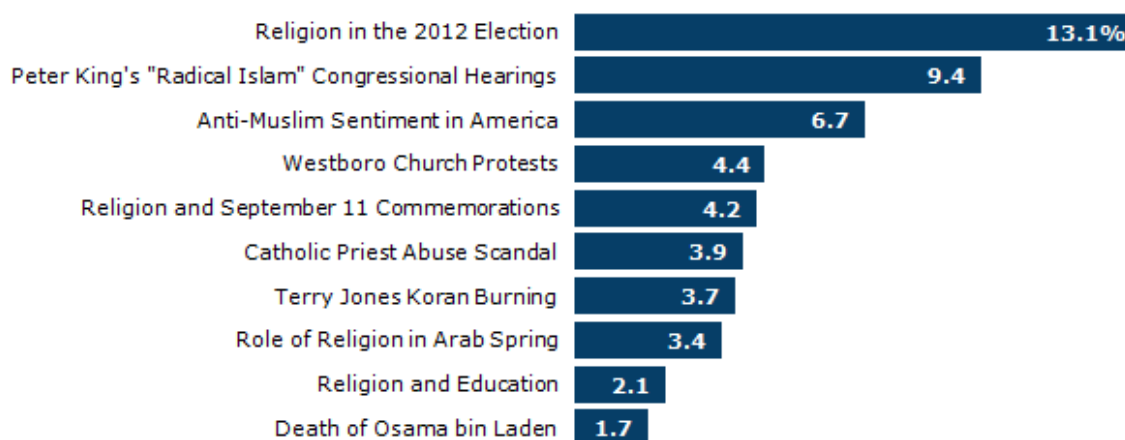
Top Religion Stories of the Year

Tensions with Islam Are Becoming a Bigger Story

Six of the top 10 religion stories in 2011 focused at least in part on Islam – the highest number since PEJ and the Pew Forum began monitoring religion news in 2007. Nearly one-third of all religion coverage focused on Islam or Muslims in the U.S. or abroad. In 2010, four of the top 10 religion stories focused on Islam, and these stories accounted for 47.9% of religion coverage. Prior to that, Islam had appeared less often among the top 10 stories of each year and accounted for far less coverage: three of the top 10 stories in 2007 (3.9% of coverage), two of the top 10 in 2008 (2.2% of coverage) and one of the top 10 in 2009 (2.0% of coverage).

Top 10 Religion Stories in the Mainstream Media, 2011

Percent of mainstream religion coverage (newshole) devoted to each subject



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Congressional Hearing on Radical Islam

The top Islam-related story of the year was the congressional hearing organized by Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) on the subject of radical Islam in the U.S., accounting for 9.4% of religion coverage. It was the No. 2 religion story overall, behind the presidential campaign.

King, chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, announced the hearing in December 2010. He later defended his decision to single out American Muslims, arguing that radical Islam posed a special threat to national security. "[U.S. Attorney General] Eric Holder is not saying he's staying awake at night because of what's coming from anti-abortion demonstrators or coming from environmental extremists or from Neo-Nazis. It's the radicalization right now in the Muslim community," King [told](#) CNN.

The March 10 hearing included testimony from supporters of King's premise as well as critics, among them Minnesota Rep. Keith Ellison, one of two Muslim members of Congress, whose emotional defense of the patriotism of American Muslims was recounted by many journalists.

The media coverage of the hearing characterized it as emotional and combative. A March 10 New York Times [story](#) said the hearing was “attacked by critics as a revival of McCarthyism, and lauded by supporters as a courageous stand against political correctness.” A Washington Post [headline](#) about the hearing declared: “Plenty of drama, less substance.”

Nonetheless, for a single congressional hearing, the King event was a big story, filling 5% of the newshole – the total space and time devoted to news coverage – for the week of March 7-13, enough to make it the fourth-biggest story of the week.

[Polling](#) by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that Americans were moderately interested in the hearing. During the period March 10-13, 18% of those polled said that they were following the story closely. By comparison, 15% said they were closely following the presidential campaign at the time and 52% said they were closely following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

Anti-Muslim Sentiment

The third-biggest religion storyline of the year involved anti-Muslim sentiment that was not tied to any particular event. Some of these stories articulated anger or distrust of Islam, while others included defenses of the faith. Collectively, they made up 6.7% of all religion coverage in 2011.

Stories about anti-Muslim sentiment often found a home on cable TV talk shows. For example, the Feb. 2 edition of the Fox News program “Hannity” featured Imam Anjem Choudary, co-founder of the Islamist organization al-Muhajiroun, in a shouting match with Sean Hannity, the program’s host, over sharia law.

On Feb. 3, MSNBC host Chris Matthews played a clip of conservative commentator Frank Gaffney, the founder and president of the Center for Security Policy, speaking about the influence in the United States of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Gaffney suggested was a serious threat to domestic security. After watching the clip, Matthews expressed indignation. “Isn’t this what it’s about – pure, utter fearmongering?” he asked.

Coverage in this category also included stories about attempts by groups in Tennessee and elsewhere to counter the perceived threat of sharia law.

9/11 Commemorations

The 10th anniversary of 9/11 provided the media with an opportunity to reflect on the experiences of Muslim Americans since the attacks. Collectively, these stories accounted for 4.2% of religion coverage for the year. That made it the fifth-biggest religion storyline of the year.

Some of the coverage was triggered by a Pew Research Center [poll](#) that found that more than half of Muslim Americans (55%) say life has been more difficult for them in the years since the attacks.

Other stories explored ways that Muslims are trying to improve their interactions with fellow Americans. According to a Los Angeles Times [story](#) from Sept. 3, “The decade since the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon has seen a shift in the way many American Muslims negotiate their delicate position as a minority group associated, fairly or unfairly, with the perpetrators of the deadliest acts of terrorism in the nation’s history.”

Violence Sparked by Koran Burning

Another major Islam-focused storyline in 2011 was the plan by Florida pastor Terry Jones to stage a Koran burning. The story first surfaced in 2010 but culminated in March 2011 when Jones carried through on his threat. The act itself, however, received far less coverage than Jones' prior talk about it, amounting to 3.7% of religion coverage for the year, down from 14.5% in 2010 when the pastor first threatened to burn the Islamic holy book. "It's like people forgot about us," Jones was quoted as saying in a Washington Post [story](#) on April 2. Not everyone ignored the incident, however. The event incited violence in Afghanistan, resulting in the deaths of more than a dozen people, including United Nations workers. That made it news again in the United States.

On the April 4 broadcast of "NBC Nightly News," anchor Brian Williams raised some questions about "this incident, which no one in this country knew about." To one of NBC's foreign correspondents, Williams asked, "We didn't know this Koran had been lit. How did it then explode into violence overseas?" The correspondent went on to discuss the strength of the overseas intelligence operation of the Afghanistan insurgency, which presumably found out about the Koran burning before many Americans did.

For the year as a whole, the Koran burning episode and its aftermath were relatively small components of religion coverage, receiving about a quarter of the media attention that Jones' threat had garnered in [2010](#), when it first became something of a sensation.

International Stories Focusing on Islam

Two stories among the top 10 focused on Islam and foreign affairs.

One of these, which made up 3.4% of the religion coverage, had to do with the so-called Arab Spring revolutions that swept countries including Egypt and Libya in 2011. In Egypt, for instance, a component of the coverage of these protests focused on religion, particularly on the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and the plight of Coptic Christians.

A May 30 New York Times [story](#) described fears among Egyptian Christians in the wake of the revolution. "The revolution has empowered the majority but also opened new questions about the protection of minority rights like freedom of religion or expression as Islamist groups step forward to lay out their agendas and test their political might." Such stories appeared throughout the year on the front pages of major national newspapers.

The other major foreign story of the year involving religion related to the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (1.7% of the religion coverage). A Washington Post [story](#) from May 2 focused on the ritual aspects of the death and burial of bin Laden after he was killed by U.S. forces in Pakistan and his remains were disposed of at sea. A "CBS Evening News" [story](#) from May 4 explored reactions to his death by members of a Muslim family in Dearborn, Mich., a city with a high concentration of Muslims.

Other Top Stories

Campaign Coverage Focuses on Romney, Mormonism

As noted above, the single biggest religion storyline of the year was the U.S. presidential election campaign, which accounted for 13.1% of religion coverage.

More than half of the coverage of religion and the campaign focused on a single Republican presidential candidate – former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and his Mormon faith. One incident in particular drew a lot of media attention.

On Oct. 7, Texas evangelical pastor Robert Jeffress introduced Texas Gov. Rick Perry, himself an evangelical, at the Values Voter Summit in Washington, D.C. In his remarks, Jeffress implied that Romney's faith should be a concern for voters. After the event, Jeffress spoke to reporters about the matter, calling Romney's Mormon faith a "cult."

As NPR [reported](#), "The Mormon religion, and the dim view of it held by so many evangelical Protestants, has mostly been below the radar so far in the 2012 presidential race," but "Rev. Robert Jeffress of the First Baptist Church of Dallas opened a closet that had stayed pretty much closed until now...."

CNN's Anderson Cooper challenged Jeffress during an interview, saying "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does – they consider themselves Christian, and on their website they say they accept Jesus Christ as their savior, as their redeemer, and they say, 'each of these titles points to the truth that Jesus Christ is the only way by which we can return to live with our heavenly father.'"

Jeffress maintained his position, but added, "I think it's better to have a non-Christian like Mitt Romney who embraces biblical values than to have a professing Christian like [President] Barack Obama who embraces unbiblical positions." He cited Obama's position on abortion as an example.

While the bulk of attention to Romney's faith in 2011 clustered around the Jeffress incident, some of it lingered later into the fall. After a Pew Research Center [poll](#) revealed skepticism among some GOP primary voters about Mormonism, CNN's Erin Burnett asked on her Nov. 23 broadcast, "Is the Mormon issue going to hurt [Romney] again?" to which CNN analyst David Gergen responded, "We've wondered why Mitt Romney has had a hard time breaking out as a front-runner, which typically Republican front-runners do. This poll suggests that in the mix – I don't think the driving force, but in the mix – there is the question of Mormonism."

While there is no clear connection between media coverage of Romney's faith and attitudes of the public toward Mormonism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has called on the U.S. media to resist letting others speak for it. At a December Poynter Institute for Media Studies event for reporters on the subject of religion in the election, church spokesman Michael Otterson made a direct [plea](#) to those in attendance on the eve of the primaries: "Engage us directly. Include us in your sources. While you obviously will have multiple sources, please allow us to define our own beliefs and practices."

Over the course of the year, some stories focused on which candidate would gain the most backing from evangelical voters, and some described aspects of the Mormon faith as journalists acquainted readers with Romney's biography. Occasionally, Islam and Catholicism appeared in campaign coverage, too. But

the Jeffress controversy was by far the single biggest religion story in 2011 campaign coverage, echoing some of the patterns that emerged in the 2008 campaign, when religion coverage spiked whenever there was a controversy involving a religious leader or cleric.

(For his part, Obama was the subject of little religion-related campaign coverage in 2011, just as was the case in 2007, during the run-up to the 2008 election. While half of [2007 religion-related campaign stories](#) focused on Romney, just 5% focused on Obama.)

Westboro Baptist Church Ruling

On March 2, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 8-1 that the First Amendment protects the right of the Westboro Baptist Church to conduct anti-gay protests at military funerals. News about the group comprised 4.4% of the religion coverage studied, making it the fourth-biggest religion storyline of the year.

Many of the news reports noted that the court ruling was controversial, pleasing civil libertarians but angering others, including veterans and their families. The church, based in Topeka, Kan., had become notorious for protesting at funerals of soldiers as a way of drawing attention to its position against homosexuality. During the week of the Supreme Court ruling, the church accounted for 78.5% of all religion coverage.

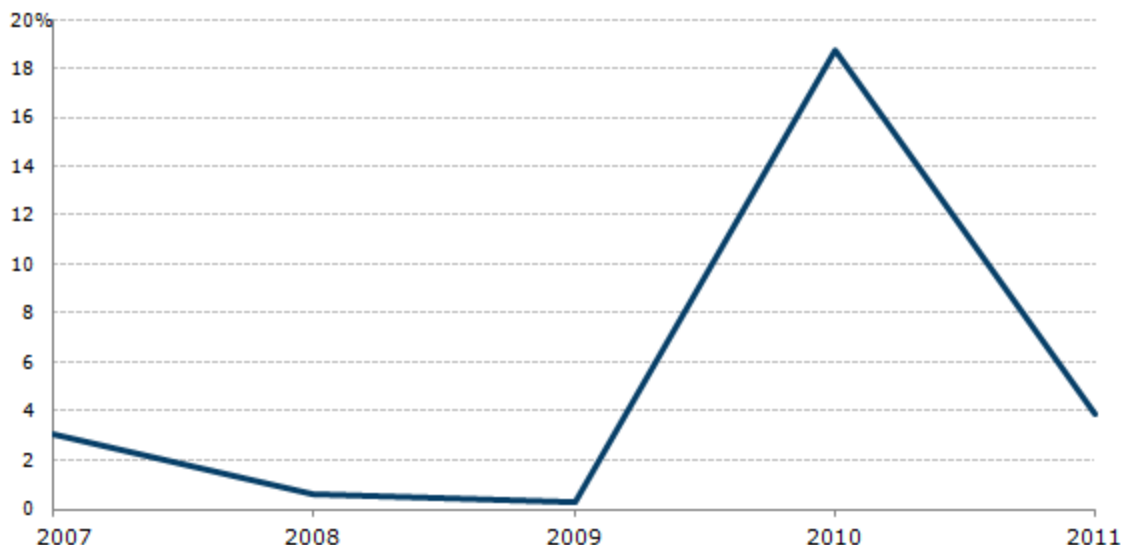
The ruling was closely followed by the public, with 24% of Americans saying they were following it closely, according to [the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press](#). That was about the same percentage that said they were closely following the heated discussion about the federal budget deficit (26%).

Catholic Priest Abuse Scandal

The scandal over sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests received less coverage in 2011 than [a year earlier](#), though it continued to be one of the larger ongoing stories of the year (No. 6 overall). In total, 3.9% of the religion coverage studied related to the subject, down from 18.8% in 2010.

Coverage of Catholic Priest Abuse Scandal

Percent of mainstream religion coverage (newshole) devoted to the story each year



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In 2011, 29% of the religion coverage that focused on the Catholic Church was about the sexual abuse scandal. Much of the media narrative centered on the Philadelphia archdiocese's suspension of 21 priests in March as part of a sex-abuse investigation. A grand jury report in February had accused the archdiocese of covering up the abuse.

The rest of the coverage of the Catholic Church focused on a range of topics, including the steps being taken to declare Pope John Paul II a saint and the Vatican's adoption of new media technology.

Religion and Education

Rounding out the top 10 was a mix of unrelated stories about the intersection of religion and education. Collectively, these stories accounted for 2.1% of the religion coverage in 2011.

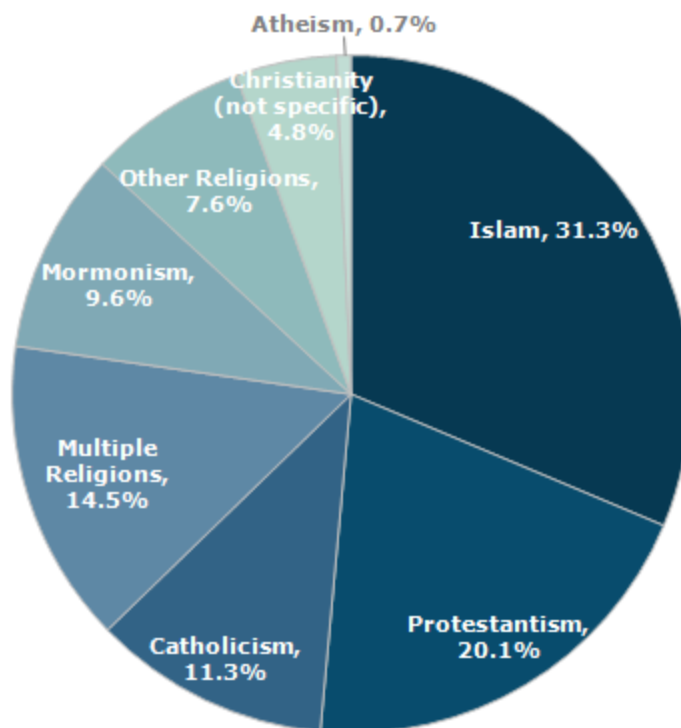
Coverage of Specific Religious Traditions

Another way of looking at religion coverage is to assess which religious groups received the most attention from the media. Here again, Islam featured prominently, accounting for 31.3% of coverage studied. That was nearly three times as much coverage as Catholicism received (11.3%) and somewhat more than was devoted to Protestantism (20.1%), including evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism and African-American church traditions.

The Mormon faith was the subject of 9.6% of religion coverage in 2011, most of which focused on politics, as discussed above.

Religions Covered in U.S. Media, 2011

Percent of mainstream religion coverage (newshole) devoted to each religious tradition



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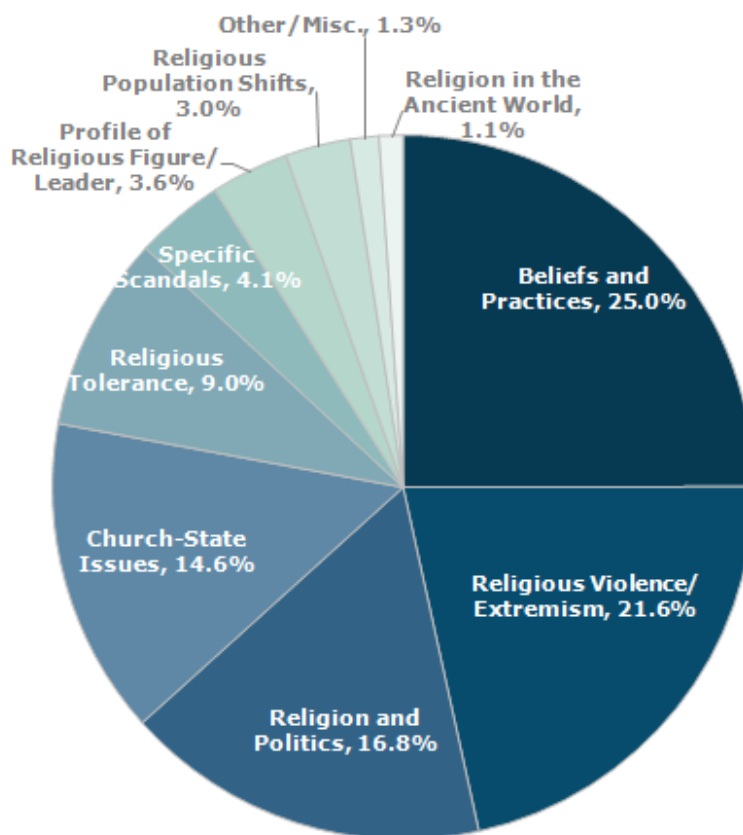
Themes in 2011 Religion Coverage

Still another way of examining religion coverage is to parse stories according to the broader themes they raised. All religion stories are included in this examination (a total of 302), whether they were part of continuing storylines, focused on a single event or were feature pieces.

A quarter of the coverage (25.0%) focused on religious beliefs and practices, touching on many different faiths. Nearly equal in attention was the theme of religious violence and extremism, which was found in 21.6% of the coverage studied. The vast majority of these stories focused on concerns about extremism in the Muslim community.

Religion Themes in Mainstream Media

Percent of mainstream religion coverage (newshole) devoted to each subject



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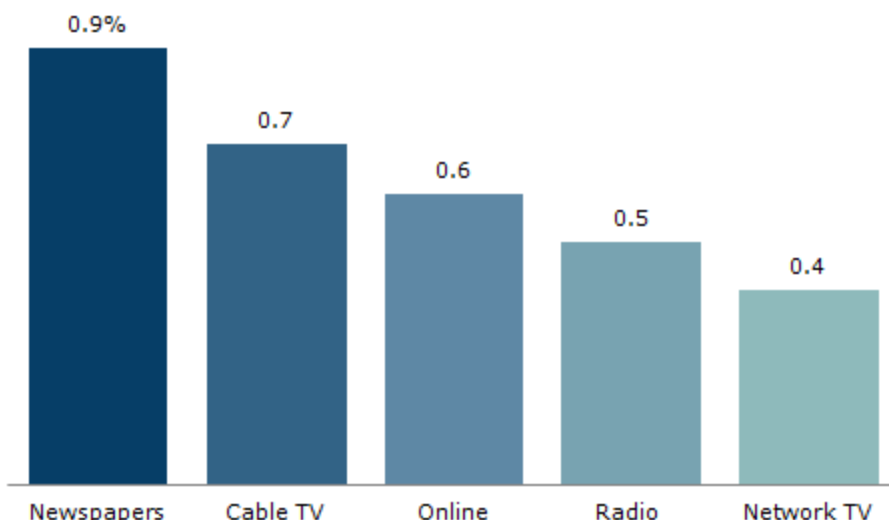
Another theme was religious tolerance, which accounted for 9.0% of the religion coverage and also included many stories dealing with Muslims. Other themes receiving significant attention were church-state issues (14.6%) and religion and politics (16.8%). And 4.1% of the coverage focused on religion-related scandals.

Religion Coverage by Sector

Does one medium cover religion more than another? This was not the case in 2011, at least when religion rose to the top of the news agenda – the front page of newspapers, the top stories online, the nightly newscasts and top cable shows. There was little variance between the media sectors, though overall, newspapers were somewhat more likely to cover religion, while the network news programs were least likely to do so.

Religion Coverage by Medium in 2011

Percent of each sector's news coverage (newshole) devoted to religion



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The religious dimensions of the 2012 presidential campaign got the most airtime on cable, where the subject accounted for 22.2% of the coverage that related to religion in 2011.

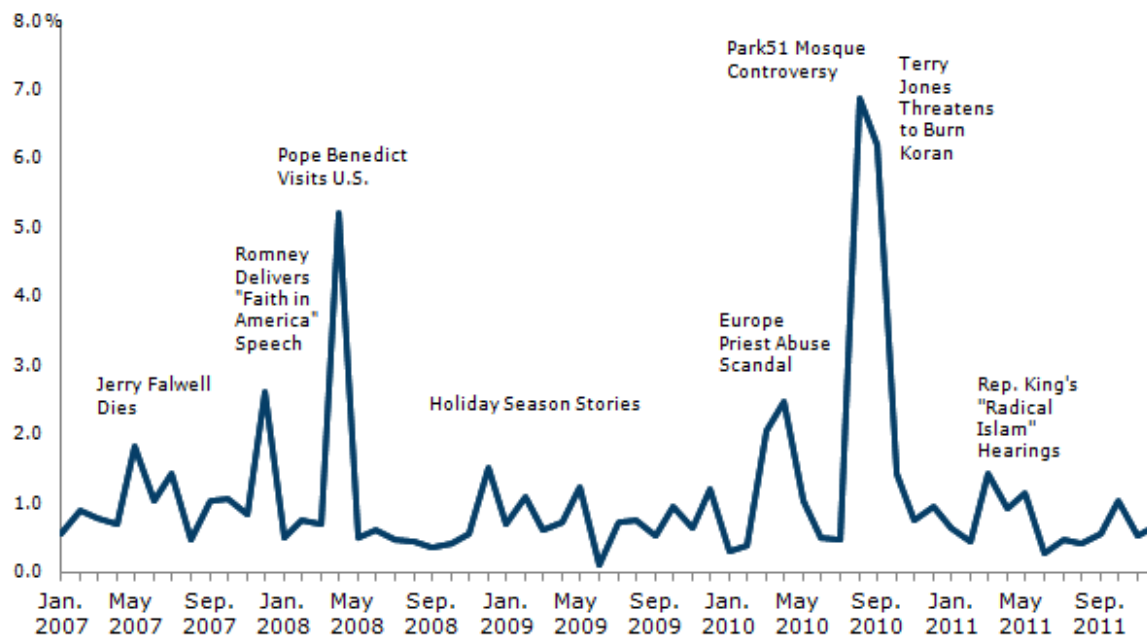
Five Years of Episodic Religion Coverage

PEJ and the Pew Forum now have five years of content analysis data about religion in the news. That time frame is enough to look beyond the events that drive news coverage in a particular year and to provide some sense of structural patterns about how the U.S. mainstream media – at the top of its news agenda, at least – treats the subject of faith.

A few conclusions emerge. In a country that is highly religious, the subject is not a major focus of the news. In the 60 months studied, the percentage of stories on religion in any given month rarely fluctuated above or below 1-2% of the space online, in print, on television and on the radio. Another conclusion is that religion tends to make news when it engenders controversy. Deeper questions of faith and its meaning are not, typically, news. Rather, much of the coverage is event-driven. The two biggest religion stories over the past five years were the intense controversy over plans to build an Islamic center, including a mosque, near the World Trade Center site, and Florida pastor Terry Jones' announcement that his church would burn a Koran. The third-biggest story during that time was a visit by the pope to the U.S.

Religion Coverage Over Time

Percent of newshole (the amount of time or space devoted to the news)



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Religion as a topic generally receives so little attention at the top of the news agenda that these momentary events often account for a large share of all the attention given to faith in the press. For instance, Benedict's six-day visit to the United States in April 2008 accounted for 37% of all religion coverage that year. More than 80% of the stories were published or broadcast within a six-day window around the pope's visit.

In 2010, similarly, the Park51 Islamic center and mosque controversy was the No. 1 religion story of the year, accounting for more than a fifth (22.7%) of all religion coverage. Nearly three-quarters of the stories about the subject (72.4%) were published during a two-week period in August, after Obama gave a speech supporting the efforts to build the center. Arguably, the story was as much about presidential politics as about religion.

In 2011, this cycle was less pronounced but still noticeable. King's congressional hearing on Islam accounted for 9.4% of the year's religion coverage (it was the No. 2 religion story, after the U.S. presidential campaign). More than 90% of the coverage was concentrated in one week in March. (King held another hearing in June with a focus on the radicalization of Muslims in American prisons, but that event barely registered in the media.)

Religion in Social Media

As with traditional media, religion received less attention in social media in 2011, particularly in blogs. Overall, religion was among the top five subjects covered in the blogosphere for only five weeks of the year.³ That is about half the number of times religion appeared among the top five weekly topics in 2010 (12 weeks) and 2009 (11 weeks).

For the three years that PEJ and the Pew Forum have conducted such tracking, the discussion of religion in social media generally has aligned with the coverage in mainstream media. That was not the case in 2011, however. None of what emerged as the top religion stories in the mainstream media were hot topics in the blogosphere during the year.

Top Religion Subjects on Blogs in 2011

Week	Topic	Percent of Blog Attention	Rank That Week
May 23-27	Rapture Prediction	21%	2
July 18-22	Op-ed Piece on Science and Religion	17	2
May 2-6	Dalai Lama Speech	10	2
July 25-29	Day of Prayer	9	3
May 9-13	Presbyterian Church Allows Gay Members to Serve	3	4

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The subjects that moved bloggers included the Judgment Day prediction by Harold Camping, head of the Family Radio broadcast network. Camping [predicted](#) that Saturday, May 21, would be Judgment Day and the Rapture would occur, transporting faithful Christians directly to heaven and leaving behind others on Earth to suffer through the Tribulation, as some Christians believe is prophesied in the Bible. When the day came and went, many bloggers characterized Camping's followers as naïve. But a number of religious bloggers also discussed the incident with more sympathy for Camping, and a few commentators also said they felt badly for those who had devoted so much time and energy to the cause.

The second-biggest religion story in the blogosphere, as measured on a week-by-week basis, was a July 18 [op-ed](#) in the Los Angeles Times that discussed the “psychological mechanisms behind faith.” The op-ed was the second-most linked to story in the blogosphere for the week of July 18-22, accounting for 17% of blog attention.

Twitter users did not focus very much on religion in 2011. In only one week during the year did a story about religion rise to the ranks of the top five most-tweeted topics, and that was during March 21-25, when the future of religion was much discussed on Twitter. It was instigated by a BBC [story](#) about a team of researchers who studied census data worldwide and predicted that religion is headed for extinction in such countries as Australia, Canada and Ireland.

About this Study

The Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life made use of two primary data sources for this study. The analysis of mainstream media coverage of religion relies on data from PEJ's News Coverage Index content analysis (the [methodology](#) can be found here). Analysis of new

media treatment of religion uses data from PEJ's New Media Index content analysis (the [methodology](#) can be found here).

¹ PEJ's coding distinguishes between what is called a broad topic and a big story. The entire universe of media coverage is accounted for with the list of broad topics, such as the environment, foreign affairs or government. Big stories, by contrast, are used to track discrete media narratives around singular events, for instance, the 2012 presidential campaign, the tsunami and earthquake in Japan or the 2011 federal budget showdown. Not every story in PEJ's sample is automatically coded as a big story.

² An additional 1.2% of religion news content was local in nature, representing a handful of religion stories that appeared on the front pages of newspapers in the sample. (The sample is designed for the study of national and international news.)

³ PEJ tracked the blogger news agenda for 49 of the 52 weeks in 2011.